

CMSWR Symposium "To Wake Up the World" Religious Life as a Prophetic Witness
 Plenary Session November 14, 2015 1:15-2:15 Sr. Mary Prudence Allen, RSM, PhD

*Prophecy and Prophetic Way of Life in the Works of
 Saint Pope John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis*

Religious Life as a Prophetic Way of Life

It is a great joy to share with you today some thoughts about how our last three popes have described the relation of prophecy to religious life. Each one has contributed significantly to this theme. Briefly summarized, Saint John Paul II laid the foundation for principal ways that religious life manifests a prophetic way of life. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI opened up further depths of the meaning of the prophetic impulse in religious as a gift to the Church. Pope Francis is providing practical spiritual tools for self-examination to evaluate openness to the Holy Spirit's movements towards acts of prophecy as an essential characteristic of religious life. Since Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM wrote extensively during these Pontificates about religious life as a prophetic lifeform, I have included analysis of some of her thinking as well.

An outline and list of sources have been provided to you for this lecture. This was prepared after my research, but before writing out the text. I hope that it will help you to integrate the amount of material provided and sources used. I would also like to clarify that in this lecture I am only representing my own thinking on this topic of prophecy and not that of the International Theological Commission.

Methodology

When beginning research for this presentation, I decided to isolate all the passages I could find in the writings of the three popes on religious life which used the words 'prophet', 'prophecy', or 'prophetic'. My research methodology likely missed some passages on the theme. I hope that it provides a significant body of texts to open a window into the mind, spirit, and heart of each of the three Popes.

Historical Development

The historical development of the theme of religious life as a prophetic way of life begins again with the Documents of the Second Vatican Council. In *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) we read: about

The term laity ⁽¹⁾ is here understood to mean all the faithful except ⁽²⁾ those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. (par. 31).

Section VI of *Lumen Gentium* on Religious Life does not describe how religious life is a prophetic way of life. More surprising perhaps is that the Second Vatican Council Document on Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis* (October 28, 1965) makes no mention of religious life as a prophetic way of life. In fact, the words 'prophecy' and 'prophetic' do not even occur in it.

Not useful

Nearly twenty years later, in January 1983, Saint Pope John Paul II began to speak about the “prophetism of the body” in his audiences on the *Theology of the Body* especially when considering the spousal gift of self through in marriage and conjugal union.¹

In the prophetic texts, the human body speaks a language of which it is not the author. Its author is man, as male or female, as bridegroom or bride, man with his perennial vocation to the communion of persons... [who are] constituted in such a way from the “beginning” that the deepest words of the spirit—words of love, gift, and faithfulness—call for an appropriate “language of the body.” ... We know from the gospel that this point applies both to marriage and to continence “for the kingdom of heaven.” (TOB 104:7 my emphasis)

From this time forward the significance of prophetic dimensions of religious life are elaborated in depth right up to Pope Francis’ statement in 2014 in his Apostolic Letter to *All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*:

I am counting on you “to wake up the world”, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.” This is the priority that is needed right now: “to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy.”²

Structure

In the rest of this lecture, wherever possible, the presentation follows the chronological order of the particular statements. Pope John Paul II’s contributions are considered in two time-frames, divided by the Synod on Consecrated Life. Pope Benedict’s contributions include a first section on an important interview when he was Cardinal Josef Ratzinger. Pope Francis’ contributions are considered more by theme than by date since he is continually developing them

¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Michael Waldstein, ed. (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). Hereafter TOB.

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (21 November 2014), #II. 2.

as we speak. Sr. Sandra Schneiders work is inserted as an interlude between Pope Benedict and Pope Francis because her writing on religious life as a prophetic life-form accelerated between these two papacies. They provide some important counter points.

Saint Pope John Paul II (1978-2005): Twenty Principles for the Prophetic Dimensions of Women Religious Vocation

Laying the foundations for prophetic vocation in audiences and addresses (1978-1993)

Adding to his preliminary work on the Theology of the Body, on May 27, 1984 Saint John Paul II spoke directly to women religious in Viterbo, Italy about the prophetic meaning of their vocation:

I deeply wish and ask the Lord that each of you discover the splendor and the timeliness of your religious profession...

In its humble daily realization, it can and must be prophetic, in the sense that it can and must show men and women of this time what in truth builds up the human person, thanks to the search, discernment, acquisition and development of convictions and ways of being which transcend changes of time and customs.

Your vocation, like the Christian vocation, yet at a much more decided level, is eschatological.³

In other words, living out our religious profession of vows reveals the truth that the human person has an eternal destiny. Religious are individually and corporately 'living eschatological signs.'

In 1986, John Paul II elaborated further on the Christian foundation of the prophetic way of life for religious. In an address to the Conference of Religious in Brazil he described how religious specifically share in the prophetic function of Christ through their Baptism:

³ John Paul II, "To Women Religious in Viterbo (Italy)" in *John Paul II Speaks to Religious 1983-1984*, Chapter 27: #262-263. Italics my emphasis.

→ The prophetic dimension of religious life is born of its insertion into Christ, the prophet par excellence, whose authority is not received by delegation as in the Old Testament, because he is the only begotten Son.

Religious, by virtue of their baptism, participate—through Christ and through the gift of the Spirit—in the prophetic mission of the whole Church, a mission that is fundamentally expressed in the hearing and the proclamation of the Word and in a life of witness: hence, in the Gospel meditated upon, proclaimed and lived. Furthermore, because religious life continues to represent in the Church the same condition of life that the Son of God embraced when he came to do the Father's will (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44), it offers to the whole People of God a witness that we can well call prophetic.⁴

By May 1987, John Paul II addressing the International Union of Superiors General in Rome observed that: "The precise purpose of your meeting in Rome is to do some in-depth study of what forms should be assumed by the prophetic mission of religious life in the Church and in the world."⁵ He then offered some advice from his own perspective on the theme emphasizing the existential dimension of the religious prophetic call:

... the secret of a truly prophetic life resides in the existential consistency of the religious woman with the witness which she gives. She is not content with taking up in turn the contestation and the condemnation of injustices...

It pertains to religious, both men and women, to be in the world "what the soul is for the body" ... (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 38). They must live like pilgrims in the midst of corruption, in expectation of the incorruption of heaven. Their pilgrimage is, as it were, an incessant proclamation of the Kingdom in process of realization, because he who has conquered the world has promised it.⁶

By the next year, 1988, when distinguishing women from men in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Saint John Paul II describes a further dimension of prophetic character— it's particularly feminine dimension and relation with the Holy Spirit:

⁴ JPII Speaks to Religious 1985-86 Book IV "Message to the XIV General Assembly of the Conference of Religious of Brazil (July 11, 1986): #352-353, pp. 204-205. Italics my emphasis.

⁵ John Paul II Speaks to Religious 1987-1988 Book V "To the International Union of Superiors General in Rome" (May 14, 1987), #111, pp. 78-79. My emphasis.

⁶ Ibid., #117-118, p. 82. My emphasis.

The passage from the Letter to the Ephesians which we have been considering enables us to think of a special kind of "prophetism" that belongs to women in their femininity. The analogy of the Bridegroom and the Bride speaks of the love with which every human being--man and woman--is loved by God in Christ. But in the context of the biblical analogy and the text's interior logic, it is precisely the woman--the bride-- who manifests this truth to everyone. This "prophetic" character of women in their femininity finds its highest expression in the Virgin Mother of God. She emphasizes, in the fullest and most direct way, the intimate linking of the order of love--which enters the world of human persons through a Woman--with the Holy Spirit. At the Annunciation Mary hears the words: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" (Lk 1:35).⁷

In the same year 1988, in his address to women religious in La Paz (Bolivia) (May 10, 1988),

John Paul II also mentioned the significance of specific charisms to the prophetic witness of an individual religious:

Your prophetic presence as consecrated persons in the world, in harmony with the charism of your own Institute, will be a continuing and hope-giving characteristic of being light and salt, sign and encouragement that are distinctions of the spirit of the sermon on the mount.⁸

Each person's witness is according to the line of his or her vocation: The laity witness to Christ through their elevation of the secular world; priests witness to Christ through their preaching, service in the sacraments, and governing within the hierarchy established by Christ after his resurrection; and consecrated religious witness and by individually and collectively to Christ and to the eschatological kingdom. Saint John Paul II offers criteria for testing whether the prophesies are from the Holy Spirit or not. "...desire to advance in truth and love. It can not be given with bitterness; ... expressed in insults, or acts or judgments which offend the honor of individuals or groups..."⁹

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988, no. 29. It is interesting to note that there is no emphasis of the prophetic character of the Blessed Virgin Mary in his encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (March 25, 1987) with the exception of her prophecy in the Magnificat that "all generations will call me blessed", no. 27.

⁸ John Paul II Speaks to Religious 1987-1988 Book V #222, p. 129

⁹ Ibid., 198.

Deepening the prophetic dimensions through the Synod on Consecrated Life (1994-1996)

The most significant development in the thought of Pope John Paul II about how religious life is a prophetic way of life occurred in relation to the Synod on Consecrated life. This development took place in three stages: 1) The working paper or *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod on Consecrated Life in early 1994; 2) the actual synod on Consecrated Life in October 1994; and 3) the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* issued March 3, 1996.

Soon different dimensions of prophetic reality are identified: "It [consecrated life] is a witness of commitment in the following of Christ and a *prophecy of the eschatological destiny of history*."¹⁰ The *communal dimension* of religious life is the prophetic sign of the communion in the Holy Trinity:

The dimension of *fraternal communion* is a constitutive part of every form of consecrated life, [can. 602] in that it is a sign of what the church is in her mystery. In the church as communion—an image of the Trinity—the consecrated life is presented as a visible, prophetic reminder of the communion which the whole church must already be living and which, at the same time, is her ultimate goal.¹¹

In section 64, "A Prophetic and Transcendent Sign", the Working Document describes the connection between a prophetic way of life and prophecy through a counter-cultural witness to truth and critique of false idols:

The mission of the consecrated life has a special prophetic role in the midst of the people of God, which is prophetic by its very nature. First of all, consecration itself is already a prophecy in virtue of the fact that it bears witness to Gospel values, which frequently are counter-cultural in a society marked by secularism. Such values are a prophetic rejection of the idols which this world is always tempted to adore. Moreover, it is always destined to evoke questions in those who are pursuing purely earthly goals. Therefore, when it is

¹⁰ *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life, #8. See also #62: "As God's gift to the church and the world, it jointly manifests a prophetic witness to the kingdom and its eschatological dimension." See also #15 and #18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, #57

lived fully and in joyful thanksgiving, the consecrated life is a prophecy pointing to ultimate realities, the definitive goal of every created thing and the final destiny of every event of human history, the earth and the universe. This prophecy is needed more than ever in an era like our own, marked by a lack of clarity about various human longings. Therefore, the consecrated life is considered "a very clear symbol of the heavenly kingdom."¹²

Here the developing understanding of the prophetic dimension of religious life is linked back to the first paragraph of the Second Vatican Council document on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae caritatis*.¹³ This lengthy passage ends with the hope that its own prophetic effort will result in a new authentic development for religious life itself.¹⁴

In 1996, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* was promulgated by Pope John Paul II. He stated that a major development in the prophetic dimension of consecrated life occurred within the Synod itself.

In his words

The prophetic character of the consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic

¹² *Ibid.* Note in the text, cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1.

¹³ See also M Prudence Allen, R.S.M., and M. Judith O'Brien, "The Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*," in Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering, eds. *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition* (Oxford: University Press, 2008): Chapter 12, 251-270.

¹⁴ The passage in #64 continues: "The consecrated life is a prophetic sign when it makes the primacy of God's love present and visible. It witnesses to that presence through the particular charism of the individual institutes, lived in service of the poor and abandoned, of the victims of violence and injustice, and of the new poor who make society's panorama a sad one. This service is done in imitation of the founder's compassion and mercy, and with a sensitivity for human rights and the just cause of human advancement. A courageous prophetic effort, undertaken for the future of humanity and to assure God's presence in the future, is also expected from the synod so that hope for the future of the consecrated life can be better developed in light of an authentic Christian service of the whole human person and all of humanity, the intended recipients of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ."

of the consecrated life. The sign value, which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life, is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life.¹⁵

Furthermore, the prophetic dimension of consecrated life dynamically interacts with people from other states of life in the light of challenges in the world:

In the history of the Church, alongside other Christians, there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit, have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the Pastors of the Church. True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.¹⁶

The document also summarizes with new emphasis the traditional characteristics of a prophetic way of life:

In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren. The fraternal life is itself prophetic in a society which, sometimes without realizing it, has a profound yearning for a brotherhood which knows no borders. Consecrated persons are being asked to bear witness everywhere with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life.¹⁷

Consecrated women who died working with the sick is offered as an example of this ultimate prophetic witness:

¹⁵ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, #84.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

Following a glorious tradition, a great number of consecrated persons, above all women, carry out their apostolate in the field of health care, according to the charism of their respective Institutes. Down the centuries, many consecrated persons *have given their lives* in service to victims of contagious diseases, confirming the truth that dedication to the point of heroism belongs to the prophetic nature of the consecrated life.¹⁸

Vita Consecrata asks for a collaboration among the various vocations in the Church in such a way that mutual respect reigns along with truthful discussion:

Prophecy derives a particularly persuasive power from consistency between proclamation and life. Consecrated persons will be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world, if they can renew themselves constantly in the light of the word of God. Thus will they be able to enrich the other faithful with the charismatic gifts they have received and, in turn, let themselves be challenged by the prophetic stimulus which comes from other sectors of the Church. In this exchange of gifts, guaranteed by full harmony with the Church's Magisterium and discipline, there will shine forth the action of the Holy Spirit who "gives [the Church] a unity of fellowship and service; he furnishes and directs her with various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic".¹⁹

In this context, the way in which persons can flourish in a life of vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience is also emphasized:

The prophetic task of the consecrated life is brought into play by three major challenges addressed to the Church herself... These challenges relate directly to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, impelling the Church, and consecrated persons in particular, to clarify and testify to the profound anthropological significance of the counsels... The evangelical counsels should not be considered as a denial of the values inherent in sexuality, in the legitimate desire to possess material goods or to make decisions for oneself. Insofar as these inclinations are based on nature, they are good in themselves.²⁰

Instead, the document emphasizes that consecrated life is a prophetic witness against various idolatries: consecrated chastity against the idolatry of the sexual instinct; consecrated poverty against the idolatry of the craving for possessions; and taking as its point of departure the obedience of Christ to the Father, consecrated obedience is against the aberrant and distorted

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ Ibid., 87.

exercise of freedom in violence and injustice. For our present theme, it is the high point of Pope John Paul II's elaboration of the prophetic dimension of religious life.

The New Evangelization through Prophetic Religious Life (1996-2000)

During the final years of his Pontificate of Saint Pope John Paul II (1995-2000), continued to develop further meanings of the prophetic witness in his addresses to consecrated religious. In January 1995, he addressed an urgent appeal to all religious to "put their prophetic mission at the service of the new evangelization."²¹ Calling religious "witnesses and prophets of the transcendence of human life"²² we sense a new momentum drawing John Paul II towards his moment of his own death. He describes a momentum of engagement with Jesus Christ, the Prophet, through the pilgrimage of life, into death, and eternal life only to return as a witness to others of the Risen Lord. To a Congress of young religious in 1997 in Rome, Saint John Paul II said:

Before the world you are privileged witnesses of this formidable truth: the Lord is risen and makes himself the traveling companion of the pilgrim man on life's journey, until the paths of time cross the way of the Eternal One, when "we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2). ✱

Consecrated life thus has a prophetic charism because it extends between the experience of "having seen the Lord" and the certain hope of seeing him again "as he is."²³

Finally, in his homily for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life on February 2, 2002, John Paul II → reflects on the prophetic value of consecrated religious for others:

²¹ John Paul II Speaks to Religious, Book IX (1995-1996), "To the Members of the 24th Jesuit General Congregation," 12, p. 47. See also, "To Religious in Rome," 97 (February 2, 1996), p. 109.

²² John Paul II Speaks to Religious, Book X (1997-1998), "To the Sick and Men and Women Religious at the Archabbey of Brevnov, in Prague," (April 26, 1997), 56, p. 76.

²³ Ibid., "To Participants in the International Congress for Young Religious, in Rome (September 30, 1997), 148-49, pp. 136-37.

Having been a pilgrim in so many parts of the world, I have been able to appreciate *the prophetic value of your presence for all Christian people*. Men and women of this generation have a great need to meet the Lord and his liberating message of salvation...

Many of them [who unreservedly serve the poor, the outcast and the lowly] even in recent years have paid with the supreme witness of blood for their choice of fidelity to Christ and to man, without surrender or compromise.²⁴

This completes the extraordinary foundational teaching of Saint John Paul II on the relation of religious life to prophecy and the prophetic way of life.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (2005-2013): Deepening the Prophetic impulse of Women Religious in the Church

In order to understand Pope Benedict's thought about the relation of prophecy and the prophetic way of life to women's religious vocations, we need to go back to an interview he gave in 1993-1994 to a doctoral student Niels Christian Hvidt on "*The Problem of Christian Prophecy*".²⁵ This remarkable interview has been published on line recently under the title Cardinal Josef Ratzinger "The Problem of Christian Prophecy".²⁶

²⁴ John Paul II Speaks to Religious, Book XI 1999-2000, "Homily for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life," (February 2, 2000), #104, p. 98.

²⁵ See Niels Christian Hvidt, "Prophecy and Revelation. A Theological Survey on the Problem of Christian Prophecy, *Studia theologica: Journal of Scandinavian Theology* 52 (1998). 147-161. "

²⁶ See Niels Christian Hvidt, "The Problem of Christian Prophecy: Interview with Cardinal Josef Ratzinger.", Available from: <http://www.tlig.org/en/spirituality/prophecy/intratz1/>. Accessed August 15, 2015.

in an interview
Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, "The Problem of Christian Prophecy" (1993-94)

on *called* *draw from*
Mary and the supreme prophetic line at conception and Pentecost.

lastly summarizing
 Cardinal Ratzinger considered the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Catholic history of prophets. Drawing from these sources, he briefly summarized the primary meaning of prophet as a person through whom God can speak to the world in order to bring it back in line with the Divine Plan.

In his words
Ratzinger: First of all, let's dwell for a moment on prophecy in the Old Testament. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be clearly established who the prophet really is. The prophet is not a soothsayer. The essential element of the prophet is not the prediction of future events; the prophet is someone who tells the truth on the strength of his contact with God; the truth for today which also, naturally, sheds light on the future. It is not a question of foretelling the future in detail, but of rendering the truth of God present at this moment in time and of pointing us in the right direction...²⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger continues his description of prophecy by reminding us that at the dawn of the New Testament is the person of Mary. It is here that the relation between the prophetic vocation women religious' identity reveals its deeper dimension. In his words:

Ratzinger: There is an ancient patristic tradition that calls Mary, not priestess but prophetess. The title of prophetess in the patristic tradition is Mary's supreme title. It is in Mary that there is a precise definition of what prophecy really is, that is, this intimate capacity to listen to, perceive, feel, that allows one to sense the consolation of the Holy Spirit, accepting him within oneself, making him fruitful, bringing him fruitful into the world. It might be said, in a sense, without wishing to be categorical, that it is none other than the Marian line that represents in the Church the prophetic dimension. Mary has always been seen by the Fathers of the Church as the archetype of the Christian prophet and it is from her that the prophetic line comes then to enter into the history of the Church.²⁸

Cardinal Ratzinger adds that the Marian line of prophecy is active not only at the moment of conception, but also before her life, and in addition especially at Pentecost. In his words:

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 6. My emphasis.

Ratzinger: I am convinced that the primary accent is placed on the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who opens the door for Christ to be accepted *ex Spiritu Sancto*. What happened in Mary by the action of the Holy Spirit (*ex Spiritu Sancto*) is an event that was under careful preparation for a long time. Mary re-assumes in herself the whole prophecy as the entire economy of the Spirit. The provenance *ex Spiritu Sancto* of the whole prophecy is then concentrated in her in Christ's conception. To my mind, this does not exclude the ulterior prospect that Christ is always conceived anew *ex Spiritu Sancto*. Saint Luke himself set the story of Jesus' childhood on a parallel with the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles which speaks to us of the birth of the Church. In the circle of the twelve apostles gathered around Mary the *conceptio ex Spiritu Sancto* comes about and it happens again in the birth of the Church.²⁹

Women religious and the prophetic impulse in the Church

Carrying forward into his Papacy this theme of Mary's prophetic identity, Pope Benedict at Castel Gandolfo in 2006 spoke about her prophecies:

In the *Magnificat*, the great hymn of Our Lady we just heard some surprising words. Mary says: "Henceforth all generations will call me blessed". The Mother of the Lord prophesies the Marian praises of the Church for all of the future, the Marian devotion of the People of God until the end of time. In praising Mary, the Church did not invent something "adjacent" to Scripture: she responded to this prophecy which Mary made at that moment of grace.

And Mary's words were not only personal, perhaps arbitrary words. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, as St Luke said, exclaimed with a loud cry: "Blessed is she who believed..." And Mary, also filled with the Holy Spirit, continues and completes what Elizabeth said, affirming: "all generations will call me blessed". It is a real prophesy, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and in venerating Mary, the Church responds to a command of the Holy Spirit; she does what she has to do.³⁰

Returning again to the interview with Cardinal Ratzinger, he traces the dynamic interaction of the prophetic and theological dimensions of the Church. The Cardinal offers many examples

²⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Parish Church of Villanova, Castel Gondolfo (August 15, 2006).

from the history of the Church and religious life to exemplify the complementarity of prophecy and governing.

Ratzinger: Later, it is not hard to see a charismatic origin in the movement of the mendicant orders. Neither Dominic nor Francis prophesied the future but they did understand that the moment had come for the Church to shake free of the feudal system, to give new value to the universality and poverty of the Gospel, and to apostolic life. By so doing, they gave the Church its true face back, that of a Church fired by the Holy Spirit and led by Christ himself. They represent a new beginning and they thus brought about the reform of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Other examples are Catherine of Siena and Brigid of Sweden, two great female figures. I think it is very important to stress how, at a particularly difficult time for the Church such as the Avignon crisis and the schism that ensued, female figures rose up to emphasize Christ's claim, Christ who lives and suffers in his Church.³¹

In these examples, we can how the prophet speaks the truth from contact with God in order to bring people who have wandered away from the Divine plan, back onto the line that God intends.

The beauty of Cardinal Ratzinger's reflections increases as he ponders the various ways that women prophets, several of whom are religious, have revitalized the Church through the centuries:

Ratzinger: The sisters of the great saints also all belong to this line. Saint Ambrose owes much to his holy sister for the spiritual pathway he embarked upon. The same holds for Basil and Gregory of Nyssa and for Saint Benedict. Further on, in the late Middle Ages, we meet some great female figures and of them we must mention Francesca Romana. In the 16th century, Teresa of Avila was very determinant for John of the Cross and, more generally, for the entire development of faith and devotion. The prophetic female line was of great importance in the history of the Church: Catherine of Siena and Brigid of Sweden could be an illustration. Both addressed a Church which had an apostolic college and where sacraments were administered. So the essential things were still there however threatened with decadence because of internal conflicts. They re-awakened the Church and in it they restored value to evangelical unity, humility and courage and to evangelization.³²

Broadening his analysis to include the dependence of theologians to prophets Cardinal Ratzinger concludes:

³¹ Ibid., p. 5-6.

³² Ibid., p. 6.

I believe that it can be proven that for all the great theologians any new theological elaboration is only possible if the prophetic element has first paved the way. While one proceeds with the mind only, nothing new will ever happen. Increasingly more definite systems may well be construed, increasingly subtle questions raised but the true and proper way from which great theology may again flow is not generated by the rational side of theological work but by a charismatic and prophetic thrust. And it is in this sense, I believe, that prophecy and theology go hand in glove. Theology, as theological science in the strict sense, is not prophetic but may only truly become living theology under the thrust and illumination of a prophetic impulse.³³

Pope Benedict (2005-2007)

Religious founders and foundresses as "Prophetic Pioneers."

In the first year of his Pontificate, on December 10, 2005, in an address to Women and Men Religious, and Members of Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome, Pope Benedict reflected on the ways that consecrated women and men witness to eternal life while living in the world: "Consecrated persons live in their own time, but their hearts reach out beyond time and they witness to their contemporaries, often absorbed in the things of the world, that their true destiny is God himself." He then concluded with a reference to the prophetic dimension of their lives: "May the Blessed Virgin, a model of consecrated life, guide and sustain you, so that you may be for all a 'prophetic sign' of the Kingdom of Heaven."³⁴

In the same year, in his first Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) Pope Benedict referred to the early prophets Hosea and Ezekiel and their description of "God's passion for his people using boldly erotic images. God's relationship with Israel is described using the metaphors of betrothal and marriage; idolatry is thus adultery and prostitution."³⁵

³³ Ibid., p. 7-8.

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Women and Men Religious, and Members of Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome," December 10, 2005.

³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (On Christian Love (December 25, 2005), 9.

Then two years later, on May 7, 2007, when Pope Benedict addressed the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) in Rome, his words reflected back on the theme these religious had chosen for their Congress, namely weaving a new spirituality.

As your President recalled, the theme of the Plenary Assembly, which is being held in these days, is particularly interesting: *Called to weave a new spirituality that generates hope and life for all of humanity*". The topic you have chosen is the fruit of an ample reflection on the following question: In contemplating our world, listening to its cries, its needs, its thirst and its aspirations, what thread are we Religious, responsible for our Congregations, called to weave in this moment in order to become *prophetic and mystic "weavers of God"*?³⁶

Pope Benedict emphasized that the chosen symbol of "weaving" is a typically feminine image used in all cultures." He reminded the Superiors General from 85 countries that "You are aware that each Superior General is called to be an animator and promoter, as your President opportunely emphasized, of a 'mystic and prophetic' Consecrated Life, strongly committed to the realization of the Kingdom of God."³⁷

Next, ~~Pope Benedict~~ laid out his own view of the qualities he identified in the "prophetic founders and foundresses" of their religious communities:

The Founders and Foundresses of your Institutes have been "*prophetic pioneers*" in the Church because they never lost the acute awareness of being in the world, but not of the world, according to the clear teaching of Jesus (cf. Jn 17: 14). Following his example they tried to communicate God's love with words and concrete gestures through the total gift of themselves, always keeping their gaze and their heart fixed on him.

Dear Religious Sisters, if you want to walk faithfully in the footsteps of your Founders and Foundresses to help your own Sisters to follow their examples, cultivate the

³⁶ "Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the International Union of Superiors General," May 7, 2007, Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2007, 4.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

"mystical" dimension of Consecrated Life, that is, always keeping your soul united to God through contemplation.³⁸

This authentic prophet is grounded in a personal relation of love with Jesus Christ in prayer and mystical contemplation.

Called to be "prophetic signs" of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The authentic prophet not only serves as a living sign of the Kingdom of Heaven through mystical contemplation and prayer, but also through witnessing to a life of suffering, cross, and resurrection. On February 2, 2013, Pope Emeritus Benedict gave the homily for the Feast of the Presentation to members of the institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. He returned to the theme of prophecy with the added dimension of the suffering of the Prophet.

So it is that we also discover the topic of suffering, very pronounced in the Gospel passage in which Simeon imparts his prophecy concerning both the Child and the Mother: "Behold, this Child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and, [to Mary], a sword will pierce through your own soul also)" (Lk 2:34-35).

The "salvation" that Jesus brought to his people, and which he embodies in himself, passed through the Cross, through the violent death that he was to vanquish and to transform with the sacrifice of his life through love. This sacrifice was already foretold in the act of the Presentation in the Temple, an act without any doubt motivated by the traditions of the old Covenant, but that was deeply enlivened by the fullness of faith and love, which correspond to the fullness of time, to the presence of God and of his Holy Spirit in Jesus. Indeed, the Spirit moved over the whole scene of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and in particular over Simeon, but also over Anna.³⁹

The suffering of the Mother, the suffering of Simeon and of Anna, and the suffering of Jesus Christ participate in an authentic dimension of the prophet and the prophetic life which is always led by the Holy Spirit bringing new life in the face of the suffering. According to Pope Benedict,

³⁸ Ibid., 12-15.

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily at the Mass of the Presentation of Our Lord on the Occasion of the 16th Day of Consecrated Life," St. Peter's Basilica, February 2, 2013.

The Spirit "Paraclete" brings consolation to Israel and motivates the steps and moves the hearts of those who await him. He is the Spirit who prompted the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna, words of blessing and praise of God, of faith in his Anointed One, of thanksgiving, for at last our eyes could see and our arms embrace "your salvation" (cf. 2:30).⁴⁰

Pope Benedict invites those present to enter into the wound of suffering in the world and help others discover the Paschal mystery of a resurrected life.

... I invite you to have a faith that can recognize the wisdom of weakness. In the joys and afflictions of the present time, when the harshness and weight of the cross make themselves felt, do not doubt that the *kenosis* of Christ is already a paschal victory. Precisely in our limitations and weaknesses as human beings we are called to live conformation with Christ in an all-encompassing commitment which anticipates the eschatological perfection, to the extent that this is possible in time (*ibid.*, n. 16). In a society of efficiency and success, your life, by the "humility" and frailty of the lowly, of empathy with those who have no voice, becomes an evangelical sign of contradiction.⁴¹

In this light, Benedict warns those religious who are listening to his words:

Do not join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light — as St Paul urged (cf. Rom 13:11-14) — keeping awake and watchful. St Chromatius of Aquileia wrote: "Distance this peril from us so that we are never overcome by the heavy slumber of infidelity. Rather may he grant us his grace and his mercy, that we may watch, ever faithful to him. In fact our fidelity can watch in Christ (*Sermon* 32, 4)."⁴²

Pope Benedict concludes by returning to the relation of consecrated persons to Mary: "Dear brothers and sisters, the joy of consecrated life necessarily passes through participation in the cross of Christ. This is how it was for Mary Most Holy. Hers is the suffering of the heart that is one with the Heart of the Son of God, pierced by love."⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. My emphasis.

⁴³ Ibid.

Interlude: Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M. (1982-2015) Religious Life as a Prophetic Lifeform

At this point, my presentation will consider two themes in Sr. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, views of religious life as a prophetic lifeform. Writing during the pontificates of our three popes, Sister Schneiders has developed a different perspective in two respects about the way that religious should relate to prophecy. The first concerns a rupture of the relation of a religious *within a particular charism* to the sisters elected as their leaders. The second concerns the a rupture of relation of religious sisters *to the hierarchy of the Church*.

Rupture of the Hierarchical and Charismatic Dimensions of the Religious Vocation

By charismatic dimensions of a religious vocation is meant the way that each religious shares the particular charism of the founder or foundress of his or her community. Sandra Schneiders radically distinguishes between egalitarian and hierarchical structures within a religious community. In her words, "...Religious Community is not a hierarchical structure but an egalitarian one."⁴⁴ *In my view,* This division between the egalitarian dimensions and hierarchical dimensions of the same religious community creates an artificial rupture. Why is it not possible for a religious community to be both egalitarian and hierarchical at the same time? Sisters in the same community are equal by their creation in the image and likeness of God, their baptism, confirmation, salvation in Jesus Christ, and participation in the same charism of their founder or foundress. The same sister may at times be elected to a general counsel, appointed as a local

⁴⁴ Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World (Religious Life in a New Millennium, vol. 3, (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2013), 446.*

superior, or some other position in the service of governing. At other times she may be simply serving as part of the community with others and not in the service of governing. The constitutions specify how the authority in religious life is lived out.

Sandra Schneiders focuses her particular attention on the practice of the vow of obedience which she describes as a mindless obedience to the will of another person.⁴⁵ She also describes religious hierarchical structures as demonic and satanic power structures.⁴⁶ Failing to distinguish between a structure itself and the poor use or abuse of a structure, she rejects all hierarchical structures themselves. An analogy with a human body might be helpful here. Each human body has a hierarchical structure of organization from cells, organs, systems with the higher organizing the lower. The body also has a skeletal structure of the body which is essential to the working of the cells, organs, and systems which it holds in place. By analogy each person has an inherent equal dignity with everyone other person, even though in a spiritual body, like a religious community or the Church, there may be hierarchical positions.

Drawing her model of religious life from what she calls the "itinerant band of followers" of Jesus during his years of active ministry, Sandra Schneiders seems to ignore ways that Jesus himself formed his apostles, calling out Peter for particular purposes, taking James and John aside to reveal to them his Transfiguration, and asking them not to share this experience until after his death. After his resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus continued to form his apostles in ways that combined hierarchy and equality.

The vow of obedience in religious life is lived practically through union with the Resurrected Jesus and by identification with him in the Garden of Gethsemane in order to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 518 and 556.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 458-659 and 491.

actively choose to follow his Father's will. The practice of obedience in a religious community is not simply blind submission to another person's will or the sacrifice of one's conscience. It is an active intelligent decision to obey out of love for Jesus Christ who decided not to follow his human will, but rather the will of his Father in heaven. It becomes a participation in Jesus' love for his Father, with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is a dying and rising in Christ and with Christ.

Rupture of Complementarity Vocations in the Church.

When turning to the second area of divergence between the thought of Sr. Sandra Schneiders and Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict we shift from the situation *within* a women's religious community where authority and hierarchy are exercised by persons of the same gender as all the sisters who share the same charism. When looking at the relation of hierarchy in the governing structures of the Church to women's religious communities, Sandra Schneiders becomes increasingly ideological. Drawing upon a secular feminism, she places all members of the hierarchy *qua* male into this so-called satanic domination system.⁴⁷ Schneiders defines: "A 'domination system' is a two-tiered structure in which a few people (the rich, the politically powerful, the religious authorities) oppress the vast majority of the people for the benefit of the oppressors."⁴⁸

Sister Schneiders argues that "Religious are ... in an analogous relationship to the contemporary ecclesial reality as the prophets, including Jesus, were to Judaism."⁴⁹ In her understanding, religious women should prophecy against the hierarchy as part of their prophetic

⁴⁷ Ibid., 428-29,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 467.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 541.

lifeform. In Schneiders' writing about "Religious Life as Prophetic Lifeform in the Church" she elaborates her principles:

✕ Jesus' prophetic ministry of word and work was not merely a threat to the particular domination systems of Rome and Jerusalem. It was a fundamental subversion of domination itself as the demonic structure operative in human history...

✕ Jesus was the end of all domination systems, all systems of salvation by the power exercised by a few over the many... The demonic 'world', the kingdom of Satan, was undone by Jesus who was bringing into existence a new creation, an entirely different world... In this new creation, those who held power, Rome and Jerusalem, males and masters, strong and rich, were finished.⁵⁰

Sandra Schneiders neglects to include passages from Scripture of the post-Resurrection ✕ Jesus' interaction with the Apostles. According to Pope John Paul II, "After the resurrection, before definitively sending out the apostles into the whole world, Christ linked their service to the administration of the sacraments of Baptism (cf. Mt. 28: 18-20). of the Eucharist (cf. Mk. 14:22-24 and parallel passages), and Reconciliation (cf. John 20:22-23), instituted by him as salvific signs of grace. The apostles are therefore endowed with priestly and pastoral authority in [the hierarchical system of] the Church."⁵¹ The priestly vocation serves the others through the sacraments and preaching the Word; the lay vocation serves the others through elevating the secular world through Christian values; and the religious vocation serves the others by its prophetic way of witnessing as a living eschatological sign of the Kingdom of Heaven. These are

⁵⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Prophets in their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 76. See also Sandra Schneiders, "Religious Life as Prophetic Lifeform", *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan. 4, 2010; "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action", Jan. 10, 2010; "What Jesus Taught us about His Prophetic Ministry," Jan. 10, 2010; "Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style" Jan. 7, 2010; and "Religious Life: Sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection," Jan. 8, 2010.

⁵¹ John Paul II, General Audience of June 22, 1990. Available at <http://totus2us.com/teaching/jpii-catechesis-on-jesus-christ/jesus-founder-of-the-ministerial-structure> [accessed October 21, 2015] par. 9 and 11,

the dynamic ways that members of the three paradigm vocations, lay, religious, and clerical are called to a life of mutual service of one another as initially described by Pope John Paul II.

→ Pope Benedict also elaborated examples of the collaboration of Christian prophets like St Catherine of Siena with the clerical and lay vocations to help bring the Church back on the line of the Divine plan. Recall also how the Marian line of prophecy, open to the Holy Spirit, gathering into herself at the Incarnation and at Pentecost all previous prophecies so that the Eternal Word could come to earth through the action of the Holy Spirit to reveal the divine plan in its fullness.

→ With those images in mind we will now turn to the final part of this presentation, in which Pope Francis offers his insights into the question, If I am living a prophetic way of life, how can I be an authentic prophet? How can I avoid prophesying falsely?

In other words,
Pope Francis (2013-present): Religious Life as a School for Prophets

→ If religious life is a prophetic way of life, how can we assess when we are living it as a true prophet and when as a false prophet? The first way to learn about how to be a true prophet is to understand our temptations and to reject them. Pope Francis offers several examples of the temptations of prophets.

Temptations of Prophets

First Temptation: to be a gloomy prophet of doom

1st Pope Francis, in his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* repeated the words of the Pope Benedict against being a prophet of doom about consecrated life:

↓

In scanning the horizons of your lives and the present moment, be watchful and alert. Together with Benedict XVI, I urge you *not* to “join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light – as Saint Paul urged (cf. Rom 13:11-14) – keeping awake and watchful”. [4] Let us constantly set out anew, with trust in the Lord.⁵²

Pope Francis then developed this theme further:

None of us should be dour, discontented and dissatisfied, for a “gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom.” Like everyone else we have our troubles, our dark nights of the soul, our disappointments and infirmities, our experience of slowing down as we grow older. But in all these things we should be able to discover “perfect joy”.⁵³

Joy is the fruit of the Resurrection given by the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Christ.

It is here that we see ^{an} another important difference between understanding of modeling the religious person ^{fm} like the itinerate band of disciples who followed Jesus *before* his Resurrection.

Pope Francis reminds us that: “Our founders and foundresses were attracted by the unity of the Apostles with Christ and by the fellowship which marked the first community in Jerusalem [following the resurrection]. In establishing their own communities, each of them sought to

⁵² Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (November 21, 2014), I.3. My emphasis.

⁵³ *Ibid*, II.1.

replicate these models of evangelical living, to be of one heart and one soul, and to rejoice in the Lord's presence (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 15).⁵⁴

Second temptation of a prophet: to flee from God.

Consider Pope Francis's two homilies on the Prophet Jonah. In his first homily on October 7, 2013 the Holy Father reflected on how we can run away from God: "[Jonah] didn't want to be disturbed in the way of life he had chosen; when he heard the word of God he sought to escape. And he fled from God". Therefore, when "the Lord sent him to Ninevah, he boarded a ship to Spain. He was fleeing from the Lord". In the end, the Pontiff explained, "Jonah had already written his own story: 'I want to be like this, this and this, according to the commandments'. He did not want to be disturbed. This is why he fled from God. The Pope warned that we, too, can be tempted to flee. 'We can run away from God,' he said, "as a Christian, as a Catholic, and even "as a priest, bishop or Pope. We can all flee from God. *This is a daily temptation*: not to listen to God, not to hear his voice, not to hear his promptings, his invitation in our hearts".⁵⁵

Pope Francis returned to the theme of fleeing from God again in his *Apostolic Letter for the Year of Consecrated Life*:

At times, like Elijah and Jonah, you may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the task of being a prophet because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently

⁵⁴ Ibid., I.2.

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, "Homily: Fleeing from God," Domus Sancta Maria (October 7, 2013). Italics my emphasis.

fruitless. But prophets know that they are never alone. As he did with Jeremiah, so God encourages us: "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." (Jer 1:8).⁵⁶

Third Temptation: to stubbornly resist God's prophetic impulse

Am I being stubborn by 'running away from' what the Lord is asking me to say and do?

In his second homily on Jonah, the Prophet, Pope Francis drew a parallel between the Gospel and the first reading from the book of Jonah. The prophet, he said, was "stubborn" because he did not want to do what the Lord was asking of him.

It was only after the Lord saved Jonah from the belly of a whale that he decided: "Lord, I will do whatever you say". As Jonah went through the streets prophesying Nineveh's imminent destruction, the Ninevites "began to pray with words, with their hearts and with their bodies. Prayer can work miracles in the midst of problems and even calamity".⁵⁷

Fourth temptation: to "cudgel" someone with a prophetic word.

If I do hear and prophesy against what someone is doing or not doing, am I then just wishing for their imminent destruction or am I praying ardently for their deep conversion to the true good? Expounding on this need for ardent prayer Pope Francis says:

"... there are those like the 'stubborn Jonah' who 'went about prophesying, but in his heart he said: if they deserve it let it be ... he prophesied but he didn't pray, he didn't ask the Lord to forgive them, he only sought to cudgel them...".⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, II.2.

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, "Homily: Choosing the Better Part," Domus Sancta Maria (October 8, 2013).

⁵⁸ Ibid., My emphasis.

The Holy Father emphasizes the importance of praying when he added, 'and when we don't pray, we close the door to the Lord' so that "he can do nothing". But "praying in difficult situations is like opening the door to the Lord, in order that he might enter" and, he added, "the Lord knows how to put things back in order".⁵⁹

after temptations Pope Francis also gives us guides for an examen of conscience

Examen of Conscience for True and False Prophecy

As a Jesuit skilled in self-examination, Pope Francis offers many examples or models for an examen. When Pope Francis visited the garden of Gethsemane in May 2014. He demonstrated the skill of self-examination so necessary to live our prophetic vocation well:

In that hour, Jesus felt the need to pray and to have with him his disciples, his friends, those who had followed him and shared most closely in his mission. But here, at Gethsemane, following him became difficult and uncertain; they were overcome by doubt, weariness and fright. As the events of Jesus' passion rapidly unfolded, the disciples would adopt different attitudes before the Master: attitudes of closedness, distance, hesitation.

Here, in this place, each of us — bishops, priests, consecrated persons, and seminarians — might do well to ask: Who am I, before the sufferings of my Lord?

Am I among those who, when Jesus asks them to keep watch with him, fall asleep instead, and rather than praying, seek to escape, refusing to face reality?

Or do I see myself in those who fled out of fear, who abandoned the Master at the most tragic hour in his earthly life?

Is there perhaps duplicity in me, like that of the one who sold our Lord for thirty pieces of silver, who was once called Jesus' "friend", and yet ended up by betraying him?

Do I see myself in those who drew back and denied him, like Peter? Shortly before, he had promised Jesus that he would follow him even unto death (cf. Lk 22:33); but then, put to the test and assailed by fear, he swore he did not know him.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Am I like those who began planning to go about their lives without him, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, foolish and slow of heart to believe the words of the prophets (cf. *Lk* 24:25)?⁶⁰

In his Encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei* Pope Francis introduces the Prophet Isaiah (Is 7:9) and the event of his prophesy to Ahaz to show that unless he has faith in God he will not understand or establish himself in the truth: "The firm foundation that Isaiah promises to the king is indeed grounded in an understanding of God's activity and the unity which he gives to human life and to the history of his people. The prophet challenges the king, and us, to understand the Lord's ways, seeing in God's faithfulness the wise plan which governs the ages."⁶¹

Pope Francis interprets the words of Isaiah as having a clear message for us: "Read in this light, the prophetic text leads to one conclusion: we need knowledge, we need truth, because without these we cannot stand firm, we cannot move forward. Faith without truth does not save, it does not provide a sure footing." (#24) When we consider the problem of false prophets and of times when true prophets lose their footing, it is important to understand that knowledge and truth is essential to the integrity of the religious vocation as a particular kind of prophetic way of life.

In addition to seeking knowledge of the truth, religious should examine whether they are *self-focused*. In the words of Pope Francis:

Don't be closed in on yourself, don't be stifled by petty squabbles, don't remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love.⁶²

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, "Address to Priests, Religious, Seminarians at the Garden of Gethsemane," Mount of Olives, May 26, 2014.

⁶¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei*, June 29, 2013, #23.

⁶² Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, #II.4.

Pope Francis encouraged members of religious Institutes to work together with each other, adding:

This would make for a more prophetic witness. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.⁶³

Finally, Pope Francis identified a temptation towards uniformity, which may involve a whole religious community in his address to Consecrated Men and Women of Rome on May 16, 2015:

Now let's move to the question: consecrated life is a gift, a gift of God to the Church. It's true. It's a gift of God. You speak of prophecy: it's a gift of prophecy. It is God present, God who wants to make himself present with a gift: He chooses men and women, but it is a gift, a freely given gift. The vocation is also a gift, it is not an enlistment of people who want to take that path. No, it is a gift to the heart of a person; a gift to a congregation; and that congregation is also a gift. Not always, however, is this gift appreciated and valued in its identity and in its specificity. This is true. There is a temptation to standardize consecrated people, as if they were all the same thing. ... No, it is a gift with a special identity, which comes through the charismatic gift that God gives to a man or a woman to form a religious family.⁶⁴

This special gift is first of the gift of a specific charism, and second a particular gift of the prompting of the Holy Spirit flowing from an encounter with the Living Lord. This gift of prophecy is unique and unrepeatable. How can we come to recognize this gift in our community members and in ourselves? An answer to this question takes us to the third area of Pope Francis contribution to the theme of the relation of Religious Life to prophecy.

⁶³ Ibid., #II, 3. My emphasis.

⁶⁴ Pope Francis, "Address to Consecrated Men and Women of Rome," Paul VI Audience Hall, May 16, 2015, par. 16.

Prophesying about women religious as spiritual directors in the prophetic vocation

In his 2015 address to Men and Women Religious in Rome, Pope Francis brought up the topic of religious women as spiritual directors in their own community. The Holy Father explained that the origins of spiritual direction were in the laity. Therefore, spiritual directors were not always limited to the clerical state. In his words:

And then a problem: the problem of how to accompany men and women religious. The communities, especially women's, in our local Church often have difficulty finding serious men and women to accompany them, formators, spiritual fathers and confessors. Either because they do not understand what consecrated life is, or because they want to place themselves in the charism and give interpretations that harm the heart of the nun.... Or, finding those rigid men, who do not really understand where the problem may be, because they do not understand religious life.⁶⁵

Pope Francis emphasized a return to the origins of spiritual direction in order to help a contemporary set of problems for women religious. He did this by distinguishing confession from spiritual direction:

In his pithy words:

A spiritual director is one thing and a confessor is another thing. I go to the confessor, I tell my sins, I feel the flogging; then he forgives me of everything and I go ahead. But I must tell the spiritual director what is happening in my heart. The examination of conscience is not the same for confession and for spiritual direction. For confession, you must search where you have fallen short, whether you have lost patience; if you have been greedy: these things, concrete things, which are sinful. But for spiritual direction, you must examine what has happened in the heart; such as the movement of the spirit, whether I have been desolate, if I have been consoled, if I am tired, why I am sad: these are the things to speak about with a spiritual director. These are the things.⁶⁶

Like a prophet trying to bring religious life within the Church back on a line of development consistent with God's original plan, Pope Francis next opens up an approach within women's religious communities to help religious receive good spiritual direction.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, par. 17.

I always advised the nuns who came to ask advice: "Tell me, in your community or in your congregation, *isn't there a wise nun, a nun who lives the charism well, a good nun with experience? Do spiritual direction with her!*" — "But she's a woman!" — "But it is a charism of lay people!". Spiritual direction is not an exclusive charism of the presbytery: it's a charism of the laity! In early monasticism lay people were the great directors. ... It is a charism of the laity. When the superiors see that a man or woman in that congregation or that province has that charism ..., they must try to help them to be formed, to perform this service. It is not easy.⁶⁷

The Pope places this prophetic challenge to form spiritual directors from within a religious community squarely on the shoulders of the religious superiors.

The superiors have the responsibility of looking, in the community, in the congregation, in the province, for those who have this charism, to give this mission and form them, help them with this. To accompany on the path is to go step by step with the consecrated brother or sister. I believe that we are still immature in this respect. We are not mature in this, because spiritual direction comes from discernment. But when you find yourself in front of consecrated men and women who do not know how to discern what is happening in their own heart, who do not know how to discern a decision, it is a lack of spiritual direction. And this can be done only by a wise man, a wise woman. But also formed! Today you cannot go only with good will; today the world is very complex and human science also helps us, without falling into psychologism, but it helps us to see the path.⁶⁸

Furthermore, Pope Francis elaborates on how a woman religious can discover her own spiritual maternity through becoming a spiritual director of sisters in her community,

How can we rediscover this wealth? The face of consecrated life is 80 percent female: it's true, there are more consecrated women than men. How is it possible to value the presence of women and particularly of consecrated women, in the Church? I am repeating a little in what I am about to say: give consecrated women this function that many believe is only for priests; and also give concreteness to the fact that a consecrated woman is both the face of Mother Church and of Mother Mary, and that is going forth in maternity, and maternity is not only having children! Maternity is accompanying growth; maternity is spending hours next to a sick person, a sick child, a sick brother, it is spending one's life in love, with that love of tenderness and maternity. On this path we will find even more the woman's role in the Church.⁶⁹

In this new invitation, Pope Francis, as a religious, is himself speaking prophetically to women religious. He is opening the possibility for deeper reality of spiritual direction which could help

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

spiritual maternity flourish within the Church in furthering the Divine plan. As a Jesuit, whose community specializes in spiritual direction and emphasizes the importance of confession, Pope Francis is calling women religious to discover through the help of women spiritual directors within their own communities how to go forward towards ever greater holiness in their religious life.

Following in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis connects this spiritual maternity in the Church to the theme of 'the feminine genius:'

He states

... what is essential to the woman's role is — speaking in theological terms — to acting in a manner which expresses the feminine genius. When we face a problem among men we come to a conclusion, but when we face that same problem with women the outcome will be different. It will follow the same path, but it will be richer, stronger, more intuitive. For this reason women in the Church should have this role, they must clarify, help to clarify the feminine genius in so many ways.⁷⁰

With this prophecy of Pope Francis as a prophetic impulse to our own prophetic way of religious life, I conclude my presentation on the three Popes. Thank you very much.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

